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ABSTRACT

Evidence of decline in academic performance and academic standards in schools and colleges, and examples of reform are considered, based on work of a Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) task force. Declining scores on college entrance examinations and other standardized tests imply that students have been learning less in high school. Symptoms of slackened standards include continued grade inflation, more lenient high school graduation requirements, and lower college admissions requirements. There is widespread agreement among experts in education that the quality of the curriculum greatly influences achievement. Some trends in the United States include: a serious decline in electing to take more advanced academic courses and a marked reduction in content and expectations in advanced courses students do take. Students in the South, making higher grades in high school, have scored substantially lower on the Scholastic Aptitude Test than students nationally. High school graduation requirements in the 14 SREB states are identified. Additionally, admissions practices of colleges according to three categories of accessibility or selectivity are identified for the United States and the South for 1979. A decline in selectivity, as measured by college entrance test scores, has occurred in most colleges, including leading universities. It is suggested that to be effective, reforms must align college preparatory programs in high schools with the academic prerequisites of college work. Examples of schools' efforts to elevate academic standards are cited. In addition, some individual colleges are tightening their entrance requirements, and several states are making progress in their efforts to improve the preparation of college-bound students. (SW)

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Preparing Students for College: The Need for Quality

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Schools and educators have often been targets for public criticism. Complaints about *what* is taught and *how* it is taught in the schools may be inevitable in a diverse society. Recently, however, questions have been centered on *how well* students are being educated. Many people wonder if students today read, reason, or do arithmetic as well as students did a decade or two ago. And, indeed, declining test scores indicate that this loss of faith in our educational system may be justified.

College preparatory programs in high schools are expected to equip students for college work. But colleges often find that many high school graduates are not prepared for the academic work of the first year of college. Are colleges in any way responsible for this predicament? Michael Kirst, former president of the California State Board of Education and a Stanford professor, thinks they are:

> Postsecondary education sets a poor example and in important ways provides negative incentives for secondary school standards. The abolition of college graduation standards over the past decade diminishes the need for high-school preparation in subject areas no longer required for the college degree. Colleges duplicate high-school courses in many areas, so students know they can make up academic gaps. Many colleges do not communicate to prospective students the consequences of taking minimum academic high-school course loads.[1]

In the late 1970s, a "minimum competency" movement arose in reaction to "social promotion" in the schools and to deficiencies in basic skills of a rising number of high school graduates. In an effort to establish floors of proficiency, minimum academic achievement standards at various grade levels are specified, and students are tested on these competencies as they progress through school. Although this movement seems to be leading to a more widespread mastery of basic or "survival" skills, it may not encourage the higher levels of achievement which are expected of college-bound students. For example, "checkbook" and "tax form" math provides insufficient preparation for most college-level work.

The current mood of disillusionment with education reflects a public feeling that academic quality has deteriorated. Americans have high ideals for education — they insist that schools provide an education of substance and content. As Diane Ravitch of Columbia University's Teachers College states:

> We expect the schools to teach children command of the fundamental skills that are needed to continue learning — in particular, the ability to read, write, compute, speak, and listen. Once they have command of these skills, they should progress through a curriculum designed to enlarge their powers. . . . The curriculum should be designed so that every student has the fullest opportunity to develop his powers, intelligence, interests, talent, and understanding.[2]

Decline in academic quality has become a national concern and is currently being examined by a task force assembled by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). This Task Force on Higher Education and the Schools has issued a report, *The Need for Quality,* which focuses on improving academic performance in schools and colleges.[3] Three of the 25 recommendations are pertinent to this discussion and urge that:

- ☐ the state boards of education and of higher education in each state establish a joint committee to consider concerted action to establish and raise standards both for the high school curriculum and for the general education component of higher education;
- ☐ the state boards of education examine the offerings of high schools for the purpose of strengthening the major field requirements, preventing substitution of peripheral courses for major subject requirements, and recommending repeal of legislatively mandated courses outside the major subjects; and
- ☐ the higher education board in each state seek simultaneous action by the colleges and universities to raise admissions standards, and invite the private colleges to participate in this general move.

issues in higher education

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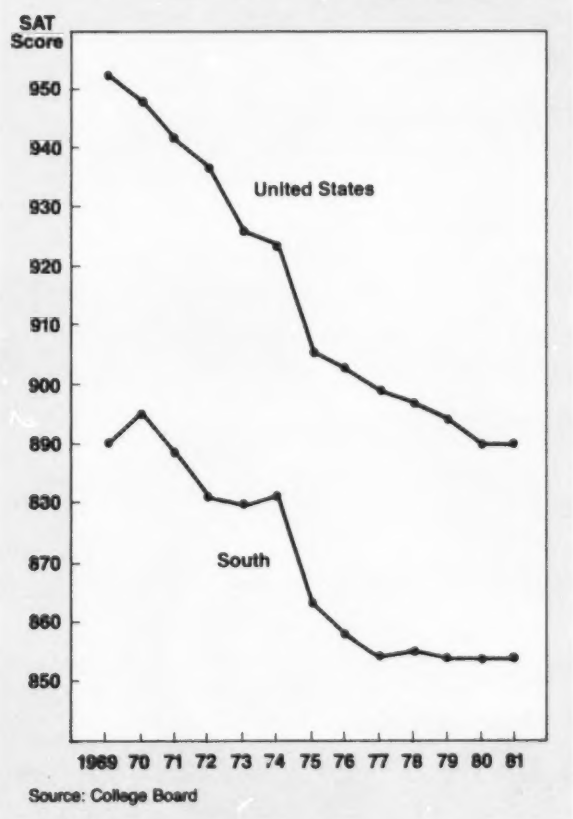
Academic Performance

Mounting evidence indicates that the academic performance of high school graduates is lower today than in the past. Declining scores on college entrance examinations imply that students have been learning less in high school. Average scores on both the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT) have dropped steadily for almost two decades. The declines in average scores during the 1960s can be attributed, in part, to the expanded pool of students who took the tests. Since about 1970, however, the declines appear to stem from lowered academic preparation of test-takers in general.[4] The trend of SAT scores in the South has paralleled the declines nationally; at the same time, average SAT scores in the South have consistently been significantly lower than the national scores (see Figure 1). The much publicized SAT decline provides objective evidence that the performance of prospective college students has deteriorated for almost two decades in the United States.

Other standardized test results confirm the reduction in academic preparation of high school graduates. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests have sought to measure changes in achievement of the nation's youth in various areas of learning over the past decade. Scores on these tests indicate that science and math achievement of 17-year-olds has declined appreciably. Moreover, the NAEP tests show a significant decline among students at all levels in ability to apply understanding and interpretation beyond the rudimentary arithmetic skills.[5] Overall, science and math performance has declined more than achievement in social studies, and considerably more than in reading and writing.[6] Analyses of the NAEP results indicate that the greatest declines in achievement occur among the older students, suggesting that high schools may be more responsible for the declines than elementary schools.

Figure 1

Combined Verbal and Math SAT Averages for the United States and the South, 1969-1981



Source: College Board

The drop in academic performance is also illustrated by the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE), which many high school students take with the SAT. The TSWE was developed by the Educational Testing Service to evaluate recognition of standard written English. Since the test was introduced in 1975, average scores on the TSWE have declined each year. TSWE scores in the South average lower than the nation.

In addition, confirmation of the fall-off in quantitative ability is provided by a recent study from the Conference Board of Mathematical Sciences, a Washington-based organization representing 12 mathematical societies. The study found that the number of students needing to take remedial math courses at colleges and universities had risen by 70 percent in the last five years.

Academic Standards

What is the connection between academic performance and academic standards? John Gardner sees a strong link:

> The educational system provides the young person with a sense of what society expects of him in the way of performance. If it is lax in its demands, then he will believe that such are the expectations of society. If much is expected of him, the chances are that he will expect much of himself. This is why it is important that a society create an atmosphere that encourages effort, striving, and vigorous performance.[7]

Some critics of education contend that academic standards have been compromised at each stage of a student's passage through high school and into college. Is a downward spiral set into motion by academic standards which reflect lower expectations of what students can learn? Lower expectations inevitably affect achievement, and lower academic standards permit students to advance in spite of minimum achievement. Symptoms of slackened standards include continued grade inflation, more lenient high school graduation requirements, and lower college admissions requirements — essentially, students are taking fewer academically rigorous courses and doing less work.

High School Curriculum

In recent years, evidence has accumulated indicating that many high schools do not adequately prepare students for college work. One illustration comes from a 1980 study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of high schools across the nation on the amount of coursework in mathematics and science taken by seniors. One-third or less had taken three years or more of coursework — 34 percent in mathematics and 23 percent in science — yet 47 percent planned to enter academic programs in a two- or four-year college.[8] A strong background in mathematics and science is crucial for students entering engineering and high technol-

ogy fields, where manpower shortages are widely reported.

High school students sometimes fail to anticipate the academic requirements of college programs. Some students are admitted into colleges and universities without having taken the prerequisite high school work for the programs they intend to enter. A study of the mathematical preparation of high school seniors in Wyoming found that 28 percent were unprepared for the programs they planned to pursue, and 21 percent were unaware that they had chosen college programs for which they did not have entry-level mathematical skills. The Wyoming study also found that college-bound women terminated their study of mathematics much earlier than college-bound men, which limited their occupational possibilities.[9]

The rigor of courses themselves has eroded, according to a 1978 report from the National Academy of Education (NAE) Committee on Testing and Basic Skills. The intellectual standards of required courses have declined in many schools, with many "good" classes spending less time "on task," and easy courses becoming more common. Less opportunity for academically talented students to pursue intensive study was provided in secondary schools. The NAE panel recommended more effective use of school time spent "on task."[10]

There is widespread agreement among experts in education that the quality of the curriculum greatly influences achievement. Some trends in the United States have been described by Kirst, including:

- ☐ a serious decline in electing to take more advanced academic courses;
- ☐ a marked reduction in content and expectations in advanced courses students do take;
- ☐ weakened graduation requirements in many high schools, and powerful disincentives for rigorous academic coursework in college entrance requirements; and
- ☐ use of texts that are not sufficiently challenging.

Kirst's evidence shows that the percentage of ninth through twelfth grade students enrolled in English, science, math, and foreign language courses has declined.[11]

Meanwhile, students have been earning higher grades while doing less work. The self-reported average high school grades of college freshmen increased steadily throughout the decade of the 1970s. High school grades, as reported by college freshmen, clearly indicate that grade inflation has occurred at the same time that SAT scores have declined. Students in the South, while making higher grades in high school, have scored substantially lower on the SAT than students nationally. But students have not been doing more homework to get better grades: 1972 and 1980 studies of high school students across the nation show the amount of time spent on homework per week by high school seniors has declined. In 1972, just over half of the seniors surveyed spent less than five hours per week on homework; in 1980, over two-thirds of the seniors spent less than five hours per week on homework. Almost one-third of the 1972 seniors spent five to ten hours per week on homework; in 1980, less than one-fifth of the seniors spent this amount of time.[12]

Most states have minimum requirements for high school graduation, but these requirements are generally inconsequential and are easily avoided, since rigorous definitions of required courses are rare. For example, students often may take remedial math instead of algebra or geometry and still satisfy the math requirement. Most states require four years of English, but substitutions — such as film-making or "yearbook" — are allowed and thus hinder the academic preparation of students. Furthermore, since the fourth year of English is frequently the only unmet requirement for high school seniors, these students often fill the remainder of their schedules with "fluff" courses or attend school for only a few hours each day.

The 1980 high school graduation requirements in the 14 SREB states are shown in Table 1. The average course

Table 1

High School Graduation Requirements in the SREB States, 1980

	Units of Study							
	English	Social Studies	Mathematics	Science	Physical Education/Health	Electives	Other	Total
Alabama	4	3	1	1	4	7		20
Arkansas	4	1			1		10*	16
Florida	(Requirements determined by local boards.)							
Georgia	3	1	1	1	⅗	10	3½	20
Kentucky	3	2	2	2	1	8		18
Louisiana	3	2	2	2	2	8½	½	20
Maryland	4	3	2	2	1	8		20
Mississippi	3	2½	1	1		8½		16
North Carolina	4	2	1	2	1	6		16
South Carolina	4	3	2	1	1	7		18
Tennessee	4	1½	1	1	1½	9		18
Texas	3	2½	2	2	2	6½		18
Virginia	4	3	1	1	2	7		18
West Virginia	4	3	1	1	1	7		17
AVERAGE	3.6	2.3	1.4	1.4	1.4	7.7		18.1

*Includes one major of three units (exclusive of English) and three minors of two units each.

Source: National Association of Secondary School Principals, *State-Mandated Graduation Requirements 1980.*

requirements were: 3.6 years of English, 2.3 years of social studies, 1.4 years of math, 1.4 years of science, and 1.4 years of physical education/health. Several of these states required students to take less math or science than health/physical education, and electives comprised about 40 percent of the average curriculum.

Students tend to select elective courses for reasons other than academic merit. Easy, interesting, and relevant courses are more appealing than academically rigorous courses, which demand much more work and can erode grade-point averages.

College Admissions

Admissions requirements determine the "accessibility" or "selectivity" of a college. "Open-door" institutions admit all high school graduates without review of conventional academic qualifications. "Selective" institutions admit a majority of applicants who meet some specified level of academic achievement or other qualifications above and beyond high school graduation. "Competitive" institutions admit only a limited number of those applicants who meet a specified level of academic achievement or other qualifications above and beyond high school graduation. The distribution of responses to a survey by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and the College Board is shown in Table 2. Nationally, there are about the same number of "open-door" as "competitive" institutions; roughly three-quarters of all the colleges are "selective." The South, however, has almost twice as many "open-door" as "competitive" institutions.

Selective and competitive colleges generally review high school grade-point averages (GPAs), high school class rank, and college entrance examination (SAT or ACT) scores. The

Table 2

General Admissions Practices of Colleges According to Three Categories of Accessibility or Selectivity, United States and South, 1979

Accessibility/ Selectivity		Four-Year Institutions		
		All	Public	Private
Open-door	United States	12%	20%	8%
	South	16	17	15
Selective	United States	76	70	79
	South	74	75	75
Competitive	United States	12	10	14
	South	9	8	10

Source: AACRAO/College Board Survey, 1979.

colleges surveyed for this information require, on the average, a "low C" or "C" high school GPA, a high school class rank in the top three-fifths of the class, and college entrance examination scores at approximately the 20th percentile (this means that about 80 percent of the students who take the SAT or ACT score high enough to meet the minimum requirements for the average college). Minimum academic standards in the South generally average lower than in the nation. Table 3 summarizes the minimum standards for public and private four-year colleges in the nation and the South.

Table 3

Minimum Academic Standards for Admissions, United States and South, 1979

Mean Requirements For:		Four-Year Institutions		
		All	Public	Private
High School Grade-Point Average	U.S.	2.0	2.0	2.0
	South	1.9	1.9	1.9
Percentile Rank in High School Class	U.S.	43	40	44
	South	43	40	44
SAT (Verbal + Math Scores)	U.S.	750	740	754
	South	700	691	709
ACT Composite Score	U.S.	16.3	16.2	16.4
	South	15.4	15.1	15.7

Source: AACRAO/College Board Survey, 1979.

The 1979 study of college admissions by AACRAO and the College Board surveyed 2,623 regionally accredited, undergraduate, degree-granting institutions of higher education. (Data from the AACRAO-College Board survey for two-year colleges are not included, since these institutions, especially community colleges, generally provide wider access to postsecondary education through open admissions policies and are not expected to have rigorous entrance requirements.) Nationally, 44 percent of the public and 28 percent of the private four-year institutions responding to the survey lacked admissions requirements in English. Similarly, 49 percent of the public and 30 percent of the private four-year institutions lacked admissions standards in mathematics. For those institutions that did have requirements, the number of years which *are* required in high school subjects for entrance to four-year colleges is presented in Table 4. English is the only subject for which three or more years of study in high school were required, on the average.

Students with weak backgrounds in mathematics may find themselves at a disadvantage in many colleges and universities. Some programs — accounting, computer science, and engineering, for instance — may require more preparation in mathematics than other programs in the same college or university. A survey of the 1980 graduates of the University of California at Los Angeles found that 60 percent of the students ended up majoring in fields that required three years of math before work in the major could be started.

Control of the admissions standards for public four-year institutions varies from state to state, depending on the functions of the higher education agencies. Statewide practices for admissions in the 14 SREB states are shown in Table 5. The public four-year institutions have open admissions in three states; seven states have statewide admissions policies for the public four-year colleges.

A decline in selectivity, as measured by college entrance test scores, has occurred in most colleges, including leading universities. The median (50th percentile) SAT or ACT score for first-year students at the major public graduate and research university in each SREB state is shown, for three points in time, in Table 6. The median SAT or ACT scores declined at 10 of these "flagship" institutions from 1966 to 1980, and remained stable or rose at four of these universities.

Colleges, often unwittingly, have hampered the preparation of prospective college students by demanding too little of entering students. College admissions standards influence high school curriculums very directly. When colleges lower admissions standards, the academic standards of high schools fall likewise; generally it appears to take high schools about two years to adjust their academic standards to changes in college admissions requirements.

Examples of Reform

Many approaches, some of which are described below, are being tried to improve the academic preparation of students for college. Success may depend, ultimately, on communication and cooperation among the educators who influence prospective college students. High schools cannot motivate students to work harder and take tougher courses without support from the colleges. College entrance requirements must do more than mirror high school exit requirements to promote academic excellence. State and school policies to revitalize the education of prospective college students are needed. To be effective, reforms must align college preparatory programs in high schools with the academic prerequisites of college work.

High Schools

Some school districts and high schools are consciously elevating academic standards on their own. For example, in the Dallas high schools, a new grading system has been designed to encourage students to take honors and other courses with high academic standards while providing less incentive to enroll in "fluff" courses. Under the new grading policy, students taking honors courses and senior-level advanced placement courses are rewarded with bonus grade points for grade-point-average calculations.

South Carolina has initiated a statewide project to improve student performance on the SAT. A Task Force on Improving SAT Scores, established in 1979, has produced a series of recommendations for local school districts to increase learning and raise test scores. The task force has identified weaknesses in the preparation of many college-bound students in South Carolina, such as a lack of courses in algebra and geometry. Since the SAT is considered a "barometer" of the reasoning ability of students, additional courses in mathematics should be helpful.

Table 4

Average Number of Years Required in Various High School Subjects, United States and South, 1979*

Subjects		Four-Year Institutions		
		All	Public	Private
English	United States	3.8	3.7	3.8
	South	3.9	3.8	3.9
Mathematics	United States	2.2	2.1	2.3
	South	2.3	2.2	2.3
Physical Sciences	United States	1.3	1.2	1.3
	South	1.2	1.2	1.2
Biological Sciences	United States	1.2	1.1	1.2
	South	1.2	1.2	1.2
Social Studies	United States	2.1	2.0	2.1
	South	2.0	2.0	1.9
Foreign Languages	United States	2.1	2.0	2.1
	South	2.0	2.0	2.0

*For colleges publishing requirement

Source: AACRAO/College Board Survey, 1979.

Table 5

Admissions Policies for Entering Freshmen at Public 4-Year Institutions, SREB States, 1981

State	Open Admissions	Statewide Policy or Approval
Alabama	Varies	No
Arkansas	Yes	No
Florida	No	Yes
Georgia	No	Yes
Kentucky	Yes	Yes
Louisiana	Yes	Yes
Maryland	No	Yes
Mississippi	No	Yes
North Carolina	No	No
South Carolina	No	No
Tennessee	No	No
Texas	No	No
Virginia	No	No
West Virginia	No	Yes

Source: Correspondence with State Higher Education Agencies and State University Systems

The West Virginia Board of Education has increased the requirements for graduation from public high schools in the state. Beginning with the freshman class of 1981-82, a minimum of 20 units of credit (with 12 units prescribed) will be needed for graduation; the previous requirement was only 17 units (with 10 units prescribed). The January 1981 changes increased the prescribed requirements for math from one unit to two and for physical education from one unit to one unit each in health and physical education.

A proposal to change the requirements for a high school diploma has been submitted to the Tennessee Board of Education Committee on Secondary Schools. The proposal would increase the total number of units required for graduation — from 18 to 19½ — and would replace some electives with required courses. A second year of math, a year of world geography, and one-half year of United States government would be added to the high school curriculum. The proposal also specifies that the currently required course in economics be taught in the 11th or 12th grade, instead of the ninth grade.

In Kentucky, the Louisville (Jefferson County) school district has established several "traditional" schools emphasizing discipline, academic rigor, and regular homework. Attendance at the five traditional schools — three elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school — is voluntary, but the number of applicants far exceeds the space available. Parents of students apparently favor an educational setting promoting academic achievement and high expectations. Self-discipline and self-direction, mastery of basic skills,

and study and understanding in the traditional academic disciplines are stressed. The curriculum is highly structured: high school students choose one of seven majors, and take few elective courses. Teachers are respected as authority figures in the classroom, and parents are expected to support the programs and activities of the school. An unresolved

Table 6

Median ACT or SAT Scores for Entering Freshmen at Flagship Institutions in the South, 1966, 1976, and 1980

	1966	1976	1980
Institutions Requiring the ACT:			
University of Alabama	22	22	21
University of Arkansas	21*	22	19
University of Kentucky	21	21	21
Louisiana State University	21	21	20
University of Tennessee	21	22	18
West Virginia University	23*	22	21
Institutions Requiring the SAT:			
University of Florida	1,150	1,060	1,033
University of Georgia	977	994	999
University of Maryland	1,011*	1,015	960
University of Mississippi	975*	945	1,000
University of North Carolina	1,100	1,077	1,062
University of South Carolina	965	920	928
University of Texas	1,110*	1,060	1,050
University of Virginia	1,099*	1,206	1,226

Key: Maximum Score
ACT 36
SAT 1,600

Source: *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges* and *A. W. Astin, *Predicting Academic Performance in College* (1971).

problem of these traditional schools is that they attract relatively more white students, resulting in less integration. In addition, the most academically talented students tend to go to the traditional schools, which can drain the achievement potential at regular schools.

The Washington, D.C., school board approved plans for a model "academic" high school in January 1981. The school, which opened in September 1981, offers college preparatory courses for 500 students who favor an academic program over the back-to-basics education which is now emphasized in the public school system. Each of the District's four school regions can enroll a predetermined number of students according to a formula based on the number of students enrolled in each area. Students in the top 18 percent of their eighth-grade class are eligible. Students of the model school are required to take more math, social science, and foreign language courses than their counterparts at regular schools. They also work part-time in their community or school. Advanced courses and laboratory facilities are available at nearby Howard University. Some critics have charged that the school represents a "tracking" system. According to a school board member, public sentiment was instrumental in the school board's approval of this model academic school plan, and the public appears to be supportive.

Colleges and Universities

Some individual colleges and universities are tightening their entrance requirements. In addition to encouraging secondary school improvement of college-preparatory programs, stricter admissions standards help reduce the heavy costs of providing remedial instruction to underprepared students.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has approved a revised "general education" curriculum for all undergraduate students. As a part of this new emphasis on general education, high school students are encouraged to complete the strongest academic program possible. Minimum admissions requirements are 16 units (including the ninth grade) in the following disciplines: 4 years of English, 3 years of mathematics (2 of algebra and 1 of geometry), 2 years of one foreign language, 1 year of a laboratory science, 1 year of social science (preferably U.S. History), and at least 5 academic elective units. Because students who exceed minimum admissions requirements outperform those who do not, the University strongly recommends additional high school preparation: specifically, courses in English composition and in literature, pre-calculus in the senior year, and four years of one foreign language.[13]

Neglect of adequate preparation in mathematics for incoming freshmen is a widely recognized condition. In response, West Virginia University has adopted a policy doubling the math requirement for high school graduates seeking admission. The change was instigated by a university team study that found nearly half of all entering freshmen deficient in math skills. At the Univeristy of Texas at Austin, math courses are so popular that there is a shortage of math faculty. To stretch the supply of available math faculty, algebra and trigonometry are no longer offered during the regular semesters and, because so many students are unprepared, prerequisites are being rigidly enforced.

Admissions standards at the University of Texas at Austin have been raised for incoming freshmen for fall 1982. Students in the top quarter of their high school classes will be admitted automatically, but all others must have a combined SAT score of at least 1,100. Previously, students in the top 10 percent of their high school classes were admitted unconditionally; the remainder of those in the top half of the class had to have a combined score of 800 on the SAT, and those in the bottom half had to have a combined SAT score of 1,100.

Statewide Actions on College Admissions

Several states are making progress in their efforts to improve the preparation of college-bound students. Statewide actions adjusting college admissions requirements can "send a message" to high school students who plan to go to college.

In Ohio, as in some Southern states, all public institutions of higher education have open admissions. However, the Advisory Commission on Articulation Between Secondary Education and Colleges has defined a college-preparatory curriculum that tells students what they should take in high school in order to succeed in Ohio's colleges. Basically, the Advisory Commission recommends that the college preparatory curriculum include 4 units of English, a minimum of 3 units of mathematics, 3 units of social studies, 3 units of

science, and 3 units of foreign language. Private and state-assisted four-year colleges and universities are urged to encourage students to complete the college-preparatory curriculum, and teachers are asked to enforce more rigorous work requirements, especially in writing. The Advisory Commission Report includes specific recommendations for college preparatory English and mathematics courses.[14] Beginning in 1983, Ohio State University will grant unconditional admission only to high school graduates who have completed the college-preparatory curriculum.

The Committee on Higher Education in Kentucky's Future recently issued recommendations to improve the quality of higher education in that state.[15] In a document known as the Prichard Report, the committee recommends that Kentucky's public universities identify and agree upon basic or minimally acceptable college preparatory curricula to be required of all entering students, with implemention by an inter-institutional committee representing higher education and the high schools. A program of basic skills testing is to be developed and required for entry into higher education. Kentucky's universities are to establish admissions criteria, in addition to the high school diploma, that reflect each institution's mission and function. The University of Kentucky is to place special emphasis upon the upper-division undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels.

Universities in Kentucky have been allocating major resources for remedial education programs for inadequately prepared students, according to the Prichard committee. Tougher admissions standards would allow only the more qualified students to attend the four-year institutions; other students would attend community colleges and technical schools. The Board of Regents at Western Kentucky University has already agreed to adopt a selective admissions policy, with specific requirements for college preparatory work.

Table 7

Proposed High School Course Requirements For Admission Into Florida's Public Universities

	Units of Study		
	1982-83 and 1983-84	1984-85 and 1985-86	1986-87 and 1987-88
English	3[a]	3[a]	4[b]
Mathematics[c]	2	2	3
Natural Science[d]	2	2	3
Electives[e]	5	5	6
Total	12	12	16

[a]Two of which must include writing requirements
[b]Three of which must include substantial writing requirements
[c]At the Algebra I and above levels
[d]One of which must have included substantial laboratory requirements
[e]Electives include courses in English, mathematics, natural science, social science, and foreign languages. Two years of a foreign language will be a goal for the State University System within 10 years, pending availability in the state's secondary schools.

Source: Florida Postsecondary Education Planning Commission

Stricter admissions requirements for all public four-year colleges are being considered in Florida. Chancellor Barbara Newell has proposed that more work in English, math, and natural science be required for admission to Florida's nine universities (Table 7). Florida's universities now waive academic admissions requirements for 10 percent of incoming students. Chancellor Newell has suggested instead an "alternate" admissions plan for "non-qualifying" students who can be expected to do successful academic work. The success rate of students admitted under the "alternate" admissions plan would be monitored by the Board of Regents.

In Maryland, the governing boards of the four-year public institutions adopted plans to gradually tighten admissions requirements at their institutions in 1979. At the University of Maryland, stricter entrance requirements are expected to enhance the institution's image as a serious academic center. High school students with excellent academic credentials are guaranteed admission. On the other hand, students with relatively low high school grades must score very high on college entrance tests to be admitted. By making admission to the University of Maryland more exclusive, higher education officials expect to enroll more of the state's top high school students and to reduce the freshman drop-out rate. The University of Maryland's commitment to affirmative action continues through its "individualized admissions" program, in which students whose academic records do not meet regular admissions standards are considered individually after interviews with admissions counselors. Black enrollment has remained stable after one year of the new plan.

Changes in admissions standards can, of course, affect enrollments. When admissions standards are raised, enrollments usually decline. One of the reasons for raising admissions standards at the Univeristy of Texas at Austin is to halt enrollment growth, according to a university official. In Kentucky, tighter admissions standards at the public institutions are opposed by some people who believe that access to public higher education will be compromised.

Conclusion

Erosion of academic quality in high schools can be reversed, and higher education can be the catalyst in this turnabout by systematically elevating college admissions standards. Typically, students work as hard as they think they "have to." If they know that colleges will require more of them, they can be expected to raise their sights accordingly. Merely raising college admissions standards cannot work unless high schools respond by delivering more rigorous courses which challenge college-bound students.

Skeptics doubt that colleges and universities will be able to require more academic preparation from incoming freshmen in this period of retrenchment and declining enrollments. But the quality of the education received by college graduates has far-reaching implications for a society and its future. Public and elected officials are questioning the cost of inflated enrollments and the impact of diluted academic standards. Indeed, the best insurance for continued public support and funding of high schools, colleges, and universities is academic quality.

This edition of *Issues in Higher Education* was prepared by Michael M. Myers, SREB research associate.

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